

An Unholy Alliance: Christian Identity Extremists and ICTs

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Abstract. The rise of extremism has been a global concern, but white extremism, in particular, has been expanding rapidly within the United States (U.S.). Even more concerning is how white extremist groups have utilized Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to broaden their reach and spread their ideologies to larger audiences. This research examines the Christian Identity Movement (CIM) subset within the larger white extremist community. The CIM has utilized Christianity to justify extremist actions, a problem notably reflected in recent white extremist shooter manifestos. As extremist propaganda continues making its way through the digital landscape, this study aims to understand how the CIM has infiltrated the greater white extremist digital communities. This is particularly relevant as extremist groups are proliferating across numerous social media platforms. Due to the lack of scholarly literature currently discussing the nexus between white extremists, Christian Identity, technology, and social media, this research is necessary to understand the information flow between these groups online.

Keywords: Christian Identity Movement, White Extremists, New Media Analysis, Purposive Sampling, Thematic Analysis.

1 Introduction

Extremism is “a concept that can describe religious, social, or political belief systems that exist substantially outside of belief systems more broadly [1].” While extremism is a growing concern globally, one group in particular that has been expanding at a rapid rate within the United States (U.S.) are white extremist groups. One example of the white extremist groups is the CIM in the U.S., which is a political theology that became important to white extremists in the 1970s and 1980s. Despite media coverage documenting clear links to extremist manifestos and Christian Identity doctrines, scholarly literature on the CIM has thus far been limited in denoting real-world consequences of Christian Identity beliefs. While scholars warned about the “religion-

violence nexus” in the 1980s [2], research since the beginning of 21st century has not traced the connection between the religiosity of white extremists and how their religious beliefs can lead to overt violence. The proliferation of white extremist groups in the United States (U.S.) using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), such as computers, mobile phones, TV, and the Internet, has continued to expand as technologies have evolved. With the vast usage of ICTs, white extremist groups have utilized the internet to create their own digital communities through social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and 8Chan. As social media has become more prevalent, this has become the primary way for white extremists to share their content and network with those who share similar beliefs [3].

Due to the September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks, the threat of violence by white extremist groups had “been largely overshadowed by the “war on terror”” spearheaded by both the Bush and Obama administrations [4]. After 9/11, the U.S. government started to shift its focus towards transnational terrorism in order to prevent another such attack, and academia followed suit. This shift greatly contributed to the lack of research that exists today. Since it was believed to be the greatest threat to the American people at the time, there is not much published research focusing on the various aspects of white extremism and their foundations. Instead, the majority of scholarly articles focus on understanding and assessing transnational terrorist groups such as “al-Qa’ida”, “ISIS” and “Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan” [5]. Having scholarly research on the evolution of the Christian Identity Movement within digital communities is important because race-based violence is on the rise [6]. Unlike generations before, where extremist groups were locally based and subsequent violence remained local, the Internet has enabled social and strategic support on a global scale. They are using ICTs and their influence on social media to spread racist rhetoric online about non-whites. While much has been written about White Nationalists, advocates of enforced racial segregation, not necessarily via violence [1], there is a lack of understanding in the difference between these groups and the subset that uses Christianity to support those beliefs and actions.

One major issue is the way in which these groups communicate and disseminate information has vastly changed since the early 2000s. The influx of social media platforms and evolving ICT has created an open environment for people of all backgrounds to communicate and exchange information. In today’s interconnected world, ICTs play a vital role in keeping white extremists communities informed both on and offline. However, before we understand how they use and interact on ICTs, we need to understand the different white extremist groups, particularly the ideologies they follow and promote using ICTs.

Thus, in this poster paper, we focus on exploring the CIM within ICTs, and how the CIM manifests within white extremist communities. We do this by first examining how the CIM are discussed in scholarly articles and new media. We then report our preliminary search strategy and early findings related to the understanding of the theological foundations that remain constant within their evolving communication styles. Finally, we present a research proposal to address the lack of up-to-date research reflecting the current digital landscape where white extremist groups are operating and interacting.

2 Preliminary Review of Scholarly Literature and New Media

2.1 Overview

This poster reviews existing literature in two phases. The first phase consists of a traditional scholarly literature review, the second comprises new media analysis. This section details the limitations of each approach, as well as how these limitations are addressed by the complementary strengths of combining these two phases. Our guiding questions included, “What is the academic understanding of the Christian Identity Movement?”, “What is the level of technical sophistication of this movement?” and “How do adherents of the movement use technology to further the movement's goals?”.

2.2 Phase 1 (Scholarly Literature)

Phase 1 was a traditional review of academic literature. We searched for literature in order to identify and develop a word bank of key terms used by scholars within the U.S. domestic terrorism field. Within this process, our goal was to identify relevant publications. Table 1 shows examples of terms used. Those terms were used to find articles within databases including IEEE Xplore, ProQuest, Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, LexisNexis Academic, and Springer Link. These databases offered articles covering both the technical and sociological aspects of white extremism and technology which was important in assessing the various mediums from which white extremists operate. Additionally, we utilized Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor, International Security & Counter-Terrorism Reference Center and Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC) to search for articles related to the terms in Table 2.

Table 1.

White Extremists and Social Media
Religious Extremists Use of Social Media
Use of Social Media by White Extremists
Christian Identity Movement Hate Speech
Christian identity and Racism
Christian identity and Internet

Table 2.

Christian Identity
White Extremists Online
Online Racism
Online Extremism
Religious White Extremism

Many early 21st century theological, sociological, communications, and criminological articles were utilized to better understand the history of white extremism and computer security articles were used to document their novel use of the Internet since its inception. With our searches, we found a vast number of articles, as recently published in 2019, analyzing white extremist communities. We did not find, however, any scholarly articles after the year 2003, on the topic of how white extremists were using technology and the digital landscape. To make up for the lack of contemporary research articles and discussion on the issue of white extremism, articles were cross-referenced and checked against think-tanks' profile on white extremist networks (including the Watchman Fellowship, Program on Extremism, Counter Extremism Project, and the Southern Poverty Law Center). Ultimately, the disparity in recent scholarly articles led us to Phase 2.

2.3 Phase 2 (New Media)

In Phase 2 we conducted New Media Analysis. This allows for analysis of data being collected across social networking platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit [7]. Much like Phase 1, our goal was to identify relevant publications, but ones that were more focused on recent events and innovations. For search terms within New Media, we used the same terms as in Table 1 and Table 2 but added popular websites to the end. For example: "Christian Identity + Facebook" or "Online Extremism + Twitter". These terms allowed for up-to-date insight into the various digital communities involved with white extremists' groups. Since the Internet, news and scholarly research are constantly evolving, we also used a purposive sampling method in order to find articles from news sources like NBC, The New York Times, The Atlantic, and such, that would advance our understanding and research. These databases offered years of news articles pertaining to both white extremists and ICTs. By using both New Media Analysis, and purposive sampling methods, we were able to find current articles examining recent U.S. events involving white extremists as well as being able to follow their documented digital footprint.

3 Preliminary Findings

In using the mentioned methodologies, we found that using search terms such as "religious extremists," would result in lists of transnational terrorist groups. When using search terms such as "white extremists," a list of U.S. hate groups appeared. Using the term "religious white extremists" did not yield relevant results as it is not a combination of descriptors commonly associated with U.S. white extremist groups. With this, our preliminary findings revealed a gap in existing literature on the connections between religion and white extremism. This proved how under researched this field has become in recent years. In order to focus on exploring this gap of descriptors, such as "religion," we did a thematic analysis and identified common themes. During this time, we also used New Media Analysis and found that many white

extremists groups had theological foundations based within a branch of white extremism, the CIM. With these findings, our focus pivoted to the CIM, in order to better understand white extremist groups and their theological ideologies that sustain their movements foundational goals. From our preliminary research and analysis, we identified the following (Table 3) organizations classified as “hate groups” in the U.S. with belonging to the CIM.

Table 3.

Name	Ideology	Theological Foundation
Ku Klux Klan (KKK) [8]	Race	Protestantism and Nationalism
Act For America [9]	Race	Christianity
League of the South [10]	Race	Protestantism
Identity Evropa [11]	Race	Christianity
Racial Nationalist Party of America [12]	Race	Christianity

4 Discussion and Future Work

Through this research, we identified white extremist groups and their connection to theological groups such as the CIM. The ideology proposed by white extremists under the guise of CIM has sought to utilize biblical beliefs to portray the world in conflict [13]. Members of the CIM and its related Christian militias have envisioned a revolution that overturns American principle of the separation of church and state and attempts to establish racial purity. This has been evident in the cheering of racist attacks by white extremists online.

Scholars in the year 2000 noticed how the “link between Christian fundamentalism and Identity Christianity was consistent”, noting how this “element bears further study because fundamentalism is becoming a strong force in society and in politics” [14]. A literature review since then has not uncovered new study of this phenomenon, which is particularly troublesome given how the CIM is “a religion of the extreme Right” [14]. Since 2011, white extremist attacks by isolated individuals have, in fact, been inspired by previous attacks and even similar CIM beliefs.

The implications of the CIM beliefs and influence in the digital landscape presents interesting considerations in understanding the shift in American public discourse. Challenges in studying religious white supremacists and specifically the CIM are demonstrable in the widespread social acceptance of issues of dissent and even the sites of dissent. Some biblical, textual justifications of the CIM positions are not very dissimilar from conservative Christian positions [15]. However -- to the best of our knowledge -- the religious white supremacist groups’ espousing such positions have not been mapped and traced online. Future research in this aspect would help understand the online communications of the CIM supporters and their information

dissemination habits. With these findings, researchers should be able to monitor online presence of white extremists in hopes of working to secure digital communities.

5 Limitations

Limitations faced in this research included the lack of in-depth academic research performed on the topic of the CIM, and their evolving use of technology over the last fifteen years. This limiting factor pivoted our research aggregation from scholarly articles to new media.

6 Summary

Scholarly literature is currently lacking information with respect to the CIM and their usage of ICTs in the modern day. The rapid rise of white extremists within the digital landscape has allowed hateful extremist ideologies to be cloaked in religious terms, presenting novel challenges in the study of ICTs and reinventing the propagation of information on the Internet. The usage of ICTs by the CIM is thus a critically under-researched area in need of further exploration in order to better protect digital communities from misinformation and hate filled propaganda campaigns.

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